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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES.

Baltimore, November, 1897.

## KEATS'S ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE.

THIS paper enters a protest against that method of criticism whose genius is active to find more faults than virtues in a masterpiece of poetic art. The method is judicial, and errs nine times out of ten if not oftener. *Nil admirari* is the motto, though the other extreme of overpraise is sometimes reached; for the whole matter of the method is a question of taste, and "there is no disputing about taste."

Poe was fond of quoting that Boccalini relates that Zoilus presented Apollo with a very caustic review of an excellent poem. The god asked to be shown the beauties of the work; the critic's answer was that he troubled himself only about the errors. Thereupon the god gave him a sack of unwinnowed wheat and bade him pick out all the chaff for his pains. Who challenges the wisdom of this hint? May the writer of this article

"—better reckon the rede,  
Than ever did th' adviser."

In his *Life of Keats*, W. M. Rossetti, at p. 199, quotes Mr. Swinburne on Keats as an artist as follows:

"The faultless force and profound subtlety of this deep and cunning instinct for the absolute natural beauty is doubtless the one main distinctive gift or power which denotes him as a poet among all his equals."

To this Rossetti demurs as too strong praise, and proceeds to sustain his objections by some adverse criticism of the *Ode to a Nightingale*. As against this in spirit is submitted the following study of the same ode, exemplifying a method that takes the poem at its own value.

Given a work of art, a poem, it is plain justice to poet and reader that the interpreter be sympathetic, taking the mind and mood of the artist. What Mrs. Browning says about reading books is apt just here:

"We get no good  
By being ungenerous, even to a book,  
\* \* \* \* \* It is rather when  
We gloriously forget ourselves, and plunge  
Soul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound,

Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth,—  
'Tis then we get the right good from a book."

To *gloriously* forget ourselves is to be rid of the Baconian *idola*, those distorting influences that stand in our way to truth. Only in this complete self-surrender can the interpreter drink deep, with his readers,

"Of the wine that's meant for souls."

Does not the charm of a work of Art reside in the *undefined*, and indefinable, feeling of delight it begets? Then there is risk in applying the method for exact knowledge to its interpretation. Poe felt this, saying in his Sonnet to *Science*.

"Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?"

A true poem has within itself, part and parcel, its own excuse for being, and is not measurable by anything without itself. The question is one of *unity*, *harmony*, and *completeness*; is one of self-consistency, and that not of *thought* so much as of *feeling*. This is especially true in the case of Keats who takes his stand extremely far from "the heresy of the Didactic." Beauty is his theme, and

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know."

However dogmatic and questionable this statement may appear, it calls to mind that Browning, in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, says,

"If you get simple beauty and naught else,  
You get about the best thing God invents."

The poem is framed in a dream,—'a waking dream.' There is a losing of himself to the nightingale as she 'Sings of summer in full-throated ease,' and a recalling of himself to his 'sole self' when the 'plaintive anthem' fades away into 'the next valley-glades.'

One can imagine the situation just before the poet breaks out with 'My heart aches!' he is pensive, sad, alone with his own morbid thoughts at night,

'And the mute Silence hist along,  
Lest Philomel will deign a song,  
In her sweetest saddest plight,  
Smoothing the rugged brow of night.'

All at once there burst upon his ear, full-throated summer, from his 'spirit's sister,' the lorn nightingale.' The shock to his sleeping

senses awoke him from his oblivion with a painful contrast of feeling, because with a sweet tormenting invitation to that music's (at first blush) inaccessible home.

'A drowsy numbness' aptly tells the lethargy of the senses at the sudden perception of an unexpected and keen delight. The dull body limps so far behind the nimble soul! It is painful; it is a sort of 'nightmare Life-in-Death' sensation that is occasioned.

How many times do you suppose Keats had taken some 'dull opiate' to sink 'Lethe-wards' from physical pain? Most naturally this is the source of the figure by which he would express the effect of being too happy in the happiness of the 'light-winged Dryad of the trees.'

['Light-winged Dryad'? Milton says 'blind Fury,' and mingles Classical, Celtic, and Biblical imagery! A glance at a Classical Dictionary will reveal the myth-transforming prerogative of the old poets. Ought the Moderns to know better?]

With the longing to be with the sweet-voiced bird 'in some melodious plot of beechen green,' comes the dull brain to perplex and retard. What is to be done to overcome this, in order to attain to that? The simile of draining the opiate gives the cue to 'O, for a draught of vintage!' in the second stanza.

A draught of what? Not of hemlock that makes 'drowsy,' but of wine—of old wine!—

'Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,'

that gives life and health. It must taste of flowers, dance, song, and mirth. What rich connotation there is in 'tasting of Flora,' 'country green,' 'dance,' 'Provençal song,' 'sunburnt mirth!'

Observe the climactic effect in passing from the more general

'O, for a draught of vintage!'

to the more specific

'O, for a beaker full of the warm South,  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth.'

This is wine for souls, reminding us of Elizabeth Barrett's draughts with the blind old Hugh Stuart Boyd, in which she found

'—touches of things common  
Till they rose to touch the spheres.'

Not a draught for the senses, but a draught for the soul! Not a draught to benumb, but a draught to inspire!

As feeling is the principal thing in the poem, let us go back to find its rise and to trace, abstractedly from its associated ideas, its course thus far. Conceive the mind-state, the feeling suggested by 'heart aches,' 'drowsy numbness,' 'Lethe-wards.' We might mark this state *despair*. The next, given as the logical cause of the first, may, for the reader, be designated *the happiness of hope*, which is implied in not envying the bird her happy lot, yet being excessively happy in her happiness.

The third stage is where 'the happiness of hope' has grown into *the hope of happiness*, since a means to that end is found. Note the eagerness of hope in 'O, for a draught of vintage!' Observe the almost thirsting impatience of 'O, for a beaker full of the warm South.' From the 'dull opiate' to the 'blushful Hippocrene!' The connection of thought also is close enough to make one feel the organic relation of the parts.

For instance, the first draught is for oblivion of physical pain, the second is for surcease of worldly sorrows. In the one, he sinks Lethe-wards from self, in the other, fades away from men into the dim forest. See how the expression 'Lethe-wards had sunk' is refined into that of 'fade far away, dissolve.'

Close as is the connection of thought between the first and the second draught, there is a progression of thought in the second that makes way for the further evolution of the poem. He is to fade away with the nightingale into the dim forest, and quite forget with her, among the leaves, a certain class of facts; namely, the fever, and fretting, and groaning, and palsied age, and spectre-thin dying youth; he is to quit the place

"Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow."

He is, however, not to forget them by dint of mere dissociation from them, but by a participation in the delights of the new realm.

The third stanza, enumerating so vividly the things he would forget, furnishes thereby the motive for the fourth which opens with 'Away!

away!' as if terror inspired him to escape to the bird. Recur now to take account of the progress of the feeling. The second stanza reveals the thirst and the smacking of one's lips and the reaching out, so to conceive it, for a beaker full of wine,—to drown what? Before the cup is put to his lips, the direful catalogue of ills for which it is to be nepenthe, burns before his brain. 'The hope of happiness,' is thus desperately intensified; the fruition must not, cannot, longer be deferred! He would now *'fly'* to the leafy covert,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
that were too slow!

If he would fly, he must take wings.

As the draught of the second stanza is rather of poetry than wine, so in perfect consonance, when he must take wings, they are 'the viewless wings of Poesy.' There is no waiting, but, despite the 'dull brain,' a 'scorner of the ground,' he becomes, for the passage, a bird, and exclaims, 'Already with thee!' What an escape! From opiate numbness to blissful ecstasy! Now for fruition!

What follows is a reverie within the larger dream. Note the delicateness of '*tender* is the night.' What more appropriate expression could be found for the first new feeling in its contrast with the old? The ideal place for reverie was suggested in the first stanza in these words:

'In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless.'

In the fourth stanza it is elaborated with marvellous skill:

'And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;  
But here there is no light,  
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.'

What is his reason for saying the Queen-Moon is haply on her throne? There is a light from heaven blown in with the breezes through the verdurous glooms.

The expression, 'winding mossy ways,' closing stanza four, is taken up in thought in the first line of the fifth stanza, thus:

'I cannot see what flowers are at my feet.'

The poet is not to be thought of as a bird among the boughs, but as a man treading the mossy paths, at night, of a beechen grove.

He cannot see the flowers below at his feet, 'nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs' above his head; all is embalmed in darkness. As he walks along he has to guess the sweets, of the grass, 'the thicket,' 'the fruit-tree wild,' 'the fading violets,' 'the coming musk-rose full of dewy wine.' What an intoxication of sweets! Embalmed in darkness and in sweets! Only two senses alert, the one for odors, and that for sounds.

Stanza five is given to the first, and the sixth stanza takes up, naturally and with added effect, the second. See how aptly it begins: 'Darkling I listen.' The suggestion is that he pauses to listen; he has just been walking along through this haunt of sweets. The pause is onomatopoeically indicated in the word 'listen,' magnified by the semicolon following. The conjunction 'and,' continuing the first line, is natural, and grammatically connected with the fifth line, thus,

\* and—

Now more than ever seems it rich to die.'

The parenthesis of musing left out, is

'For many a time

I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath.'

Conceive the situation, then enjoy the climax of feeling in these lines:

'Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
'To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such ecstasy!'

Consider how closely connected the last two lines of this stanza are with those quoted. If he ceased upon the midnight, *while* the bird was pouring forth her soul—the song continuing is the idea—he would 'have ears in vain.' Her song would be appropriately a requiem to him 'become a sod.'

This last expression has been severely criticised, but the connection of thought between it and what goes before and what follows immediately in stanza seven, is intimate enough to require 'sod' for the harmony of thought. He has been treading mossy ways; he was not able to see the flowers at his feet; he has to guess the sweet of the grass: all this is suggestive of 'sod.' In the seventh stanza, the second line,

'No hungry generations tread thee down,'

grows out of the idea of treading sod down,—treading him, become a sod, down. He had been treading sod down. Perhaps the word 'sod' will appear the more fitting from a consideration of the dead-and-buried idea associated with the mortality of man, and the lack of such an association with the birds of the air.

Man dies and a mound of turf is the constant reminder of his mortality; birds die too, but what marks their resting-place? Do they die, or simply 'leave the world unseen,' for a season? Every returning spring brings them back with the same fashion of feathers and the same melody of song. Nothing but a process of reasoning assures us that they die, but, to our senses, the exact reproduction of types argues their immortality.

On the other hand, to our senses, man is mortal, and only to our reason, immortal. Keats, taking the poetic view of things and not the scientific (Stedman's *Victorian Poets*, p. 9), says to the nightingale.

'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!'

His reason therefore is, that this self-same song was heard in olden-times by emperor and clown, that it found its way, perhaps, to Ruth's sad heart, as homesick 'she stood in tears amid the alien corn,' and

'The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.'

So much for the immortality of the nightingale.

He says in the last stanza:

'Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
In the next valley-glades.'

He is 'forlorn'; that word is like a bell to toll him back to himself and back to the world of sorrows.

How significant the word is, taken in connection with all that has been said and suggested about 'easeful Death!'

Forlorn? yes, for it is but 'a waking dream.'

It is a sad experience that, sometimes,

'the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.'

And here at the end we have the same tone of

feeling as in the beginning.

It was the nightingale's full-throated music that made his heart ache; 'fled is that music,' he is forlorn.

In conclusion, the poem is a circle; it is a whole whose parts are fitly joined together; *joined* together?—there are no seams, nothing artisan about it; out of the fire of the creative imagination it comes 'a thing of beauty'; it is an artistic whole showing the *unity, harmony, and completeness*, of interrelated parts, by virtue of which the reader experiences the pleasurable sense of the Beautiful.

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### A STUDY IN THE CLASSIC FRENCH DRAMA: CORNEILLE.

THE Miracle Plays and Mysteries of the Middle Ages delighted Europe for more than two centuries, but in Italy, Spain, and England, they were discarded earlier than in France for works of greater merit and somewhat more regular in their composition. The Italians began to translate the ancients, especially Seneca, and a national drama arose in Spain with Lope de Vega, and in England with Shakespeare. In France the development of the drama was not as rapid, and it was only in 1548 that the Parliament of Paris forbade the representation of the Mysteries. The religious plays continued under different names, but the whole conception of the serious drama changed. The Mysteries had had for object the representation of events of great interest to the audience, at that time, and extending over many years. No attention was paid to the unities of time, of place, and of action, and there was no division into acts and scenes.

In the sixteenth century the works of the ancients began to be translated, and in 1552 Jodelle wrote his *Cléopâtre*, where are seen the principal traits which were to characterize later the Classic French tragedy. Garnier and Montchrestien followed in the sixteenth century, then Hardy and Mairet in the seventeenth, but in spite of great freedom left the dramatic writers, there was for a long time in France no Lope de Vega, no Shakespeare.

"Enfin Corneille vint," and the *Cid* appeared